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Reducing delinquency through family intervention

Research summary

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Question

Can family therapy reduce delinquent behaviour?

Background

Early prevention is seen as the most effective and cost efficient way of reducing the chances of young people entering the adult criminal justice system. Early prevention programs can include the nurturance of healthy pregnancies to prevent Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, school programs to develop intellectual potentials and family interventions to promote positive socialization experiences.

The family serves as the child's first socialization agent. Parents model behaviours that may be prosocial or antisocial. Parents are also in a powerful position to reward and punish a child's behaviour. Longitudinal studies of children repeatedly demonstrate that parents who have difficulty expressing warmth, and who fail to monitor and appropriately discipline their children, raise children who have a high likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviour.

If the lack of parental affection and inadequate parenting skills influence the delinquent pathway then family interventions that encourage positive relationships between parent and child and that teach appropriate parenting skills would be expected to reduce the chances of children following a criminal trajectory.

Method

A review was conducted of studies of family therapy with delinquent or at-risk children. Over 40 studies involving the families of children as young as three were reviewed. The average age of the children was 14 years. Social service agencies or schools referred the families of the younger children for treatment because of their conduct problems while the courts or the police mostly referred the older children.

Answer

Family intervention studies with delinquent or at-risk children generally tend to be of two types: 1) parenting skill programs and 2) a combination of relationship building and teaching parenting skills. Parenting skill programs focus on teaching parents to monitor their children's behaviour, reward positive behaviours (e.g., compliance with parental requests) and ignore negative behaviours (e.g., aggressive temper tantrums). Although these programs improve the behaviour

of young children within the family environment, the impact of these programs on long term delinquency has been mixed.

Family interventions that add relationship building skills to parenting skills have been more successful in preventing delinquency and reducing recidivism. Apparently, the families of chronic delinquents are marked not only by parents who have difficulty in rewarding appropriate behaviours in their children but they also have difficulty in establishing a positive emotional relationship with them. Interventions that target both the relationship and parenting skills aspects of family living show the greatest effects.

Policy implications

1. Early family interventions can reduce delinquent behaviour across a wide range of age groups.
2. Some family interventions have also shown considerable cost savings because of the avoidance of future incarceration. These programs enhance public safety and provide a very cost-effective means of achieving this goal.
3. Family intervention programs that encourage positive relationships between parents and children and that teach parents appropriate parenting skills are the most effective in promoting prosocial behaviour in children.

Source

- Andrews, D. A. & Bonta, J. (2006). *The psychology of criminal conduct (4th Ed.)*. Newark, NJ: LexisNexis.

For further information

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